

The Convening Organization

A RESOURCE





Tamarack is a charitable organization dedicated to helping Canadian communities take ownership of local issues by making use of proven strategies for community engagement. Community Engagement is commonly defined as citizens from different sectors of a community joining together taking leadership, to address issues that affect them all.

Designed to promote community building across Canada, the institute's mission is to develop a process to help people create bold visions for the future of their communities, and work together to achieve those visions more easily and effectively.

Through work with local organizations, Tamarack seeks out and encourages committed citizens to build communities that are caring, prosperous and healthy. Citizens in these communities work together in a comprehensive, collaborative manner on projects that create effective systems and structures and result in good opportunities, good government, a clean environment, creative education, and peace for all people.

Located in Waterloo, Ontario, Tamarack is incorporated as a charitable not-for-profit agency. Founded in 2001 as a partnership between Alan Broadbent of Avana Capital Corporation and the Maytree Foundation and Paul Born, Tamarack receives core funding from the Maytree Foundation and secures contract funding for project specific work.

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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Many of the issues communities are trying to tackle today are tough, complex challenges: rising crime rates, homelessness, poverty, poor literacy and education, even racism.

In the average community, there are usually dozens of organizations or groups working on any of these issues. There are also many more that could play a productive role but are not actively involved.

On their own, or in some clusters, each of these groups has something to contribute to addressing the issue. These many isolated groups could make a bigger difference if they worked together, shared information, did joint research, collaboratively planned and implemented a comprehensive agenda, and collectively worked to “learn” their way through the problem.

These types of networks rarely come together – or stay together – on their own. They are either too busy or not clear on how working with a group of other organizations can make a difference. At times, they may not even know that there are other organizations that can help make a real difference!

There are times in a community’s existence when, because of a crisis or a general sense that an issue has gone unresolved for too long, organizations and people must come together. These are the times when a community needs a *convenor organization*.

Look across North America and you can find many examples of groups that have chosen to bring people together, creating an environment for them to accomplish together what they can not accomplish on their own.

- In B.C.’s Capital Region, British Columbia, Canada, the Community Council convened a group of business, non-profit, government and community leaders to steward the Quality of Life Challenge – a multiyear initiative focusing on improving opportunities for sustainable incomes, affordable housing and social connections in the community (see www.qolchallenge.ca).
- In Montgomery County, Maryland, U.S.A, the School District convened 39 agencies to launch the Childhood Initiatives – a multiyear program to improve services and outcomes for young children (see www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/earlychi/status1201.htm).
- In Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, the Region’s Crime Prevention and Community Safety Council, brings together dozens – sometimes hundreds – of organizations and leaders to increase community safety and prevent crime in multidisciplinary initiatives (See www.preventingcrime.net).

We need to have a firmer grasp of the type of journey we are asking our communities to embark on and the type of organization we need to build to make that journey possible.

These communities and organizations – and literally hundreds of others across North America – are convinced that collaborating on a community-wide scale can make a difference. And in many cases – though not all - they are seeing results.

While there is a lot of interest and support for this type of work, it is not yet well understood and many good collaborative efforts founder early on simply because the participants do not have a clear sense of what is involved in making it work.

The Convening Organization is designed to share some of Tamarack's initial thoughts – based on observing real work in communities – of the major goals, elements, phases and challenges for organizations when they choose to take on a convening role in their community.

The booklet is NOT a detailed blueprint of how to go about this work. Rather, it gives the volunteers and staff of a convenor group a quick overview of the nature of the work before them as they launch themselves into the effort and an opportunity to check in on the big picture once they are immersed in the work.

This resource is a work-in-progress. It represents the best of what we know right now about the important work of a convening organization. As communities experiment more fully with their own convening efforts, we will use their learnings to upgrade the knowledge in this resource.

If we want to unleash the potential of local communities in an attempt to address issues of concern, we need to have a firmer grasp of the type of journey we are asking our communities to embark on and the type of organization we need to build to make that journey possible. We hope the second edition of this resource is a helpful contribution to that effort.

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INTRODUCTION

On a beautiful spring afternoon in April 1999, nearly 100 people milled around the council chamber of Cambridge, Ontario's historic city hall.

They were a diverse group — low-income residents mixing with social workers, business people and officials — but they had something important in common. All lived in the same community and had worked together on a project called Opportunities Planning that was being recognized that day by the United Nations as one of the Top 40 Urban Community Development Projects in the world.

Opportunities Planning was a four-year initiative that ran from 1993-1997 and supported social assistance recipients in their journey from welfare to work. OP was a unique multisectoral collaboration that drew on the strengths of numerous community agencies, their clients and their funding partners. Most people on its management team were low-income residents, most staff had some experience living on welfare and managers played supportive, rather than authoritative roles.

It also proved to be a successful formula, helping 500 long-term unemployed people to find work or start their own business. When funding for Opportunities Planning expired, its supporters in the community regrouped and launched an even more ambitious initiative based on OP's partnership model — Opportunities 2000, a campaign to significantly reduce poverty in the region.

The crowd at Cambridge city hall that April morning quieted down when Nicholas You, Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, approached the microphone. After the presentation of a plaque and other formalities, Nicholas paused and said:

I want you to know that while we are very impressed with the results of your efforts — the 500 families — it is really only part of the reason you are getting this award. We were more impressed with the capacity you've developed in the community to address the problem of unemployment and poverty. If and when your community's local car plant leaves town, you will need to replace 2,000 good jobs. But your efforts to find ways to work collaboratively — to build a 'community problem solving machine' — means you will be better able to deal with big community issues. Keep up the good work and the best of luck with Opportunities 2000.

Nicholas said what people working on community issues across North America have known for some time — that in order for communities to make a dramatic difference in addressing local problems, they need to create the organizational capacity to bring people and sectors together, to think and dream big, and to deal strategically with the root causes of things like poverty and unemployment.

The organization that leads that vital effort is known as the *Convening Organization*.

THE CONVENING FRAMEWORK

At the core of any local effort to initiate social change is a restless eagerness to improve some aspect of life in the community.

What are the other shared elements of successful, broad-based, community-driven efforts to address specific social issues? Skeptics will argue that there are none – each community and effort is so unique, they will say, that it is impossible to generalize.

What, after all, does a resident-driven neighbourhood group working hard at building a healthy community in a low-income community in Montreal have in common with a group of high-profile leaders in Victoria, B.C., interested in reducing poverty as part of a Quality of Life campaign?

Plenty, as it turns out. In the short 10-15 years in which collaboration and convening work have been recognized as critical to solving community problems – a number of factors have emerged that are, for the most part, relevant to all convening groups:

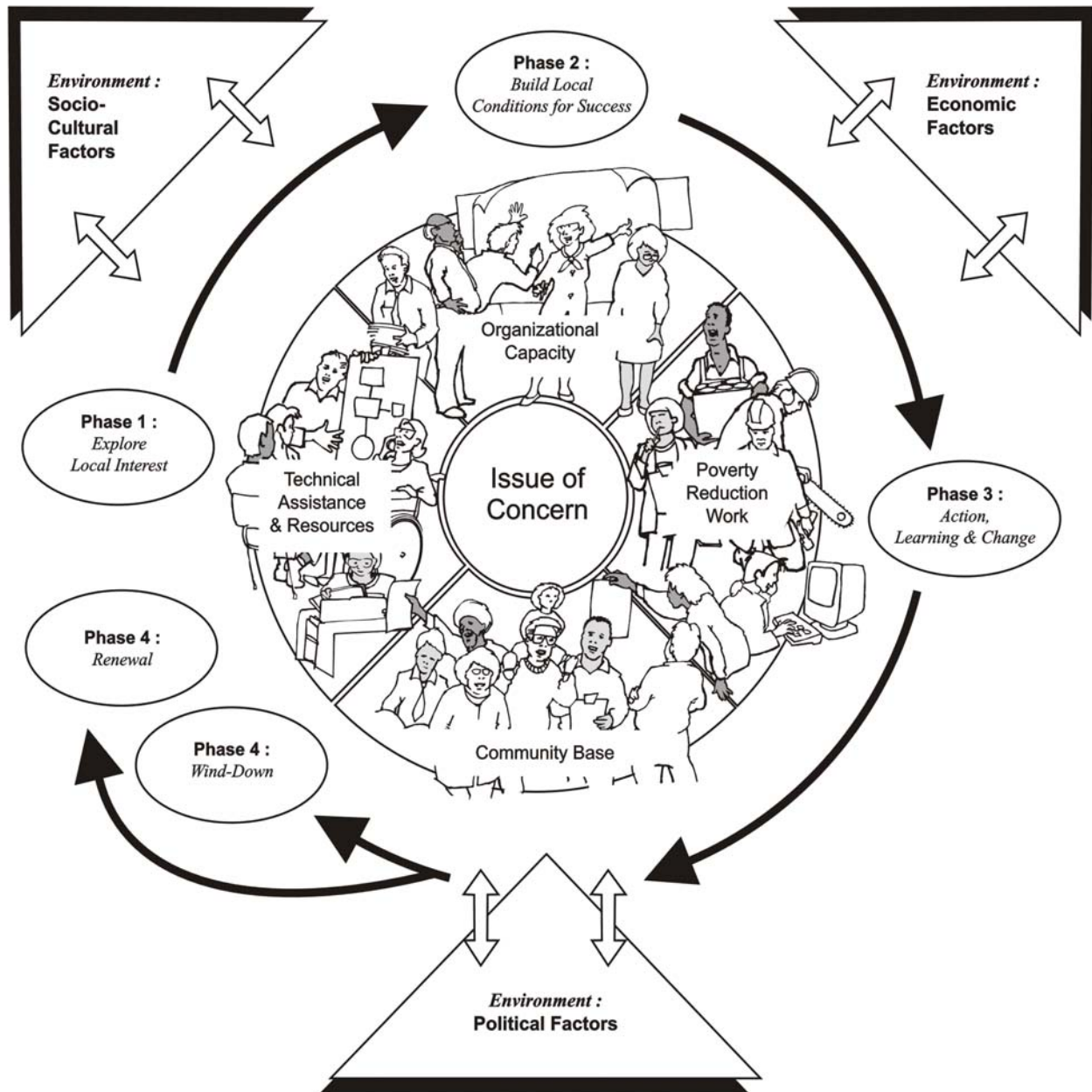
Woven together, these ingredients combine to provide a framework for all convenor groups to plan, manage and steward their work.

- Successful convening groups do a good job in at least four areas or building blocks: comprehensive issue-related work, building a community base, building their own organizational capacity, and importing technical and financial resources;
- Local efforts – and the key tasks of a convening organizations – tend to unfold through a series of four distinct phases over time: exploring local interest, building local conditions for success, action-learning and change, and a phase of renewal or wind-down;
- The economic, policy and socio-cultural environment in which a convenor group operates strongly influences how it plans and manages its work.

Woven together, these ingredients combine to provide a framework for all convenor groups – regardless of their community, unique dynamics or leadership group – to plan, manage and steward their work. At the same time, the framework is flexible enough to help convenor groups understand and respond to their specific circumstances.

THE FRAMEWORK

for
Convening Comprehensive, Multisectoral
Local Efforts to Reduce Poverty



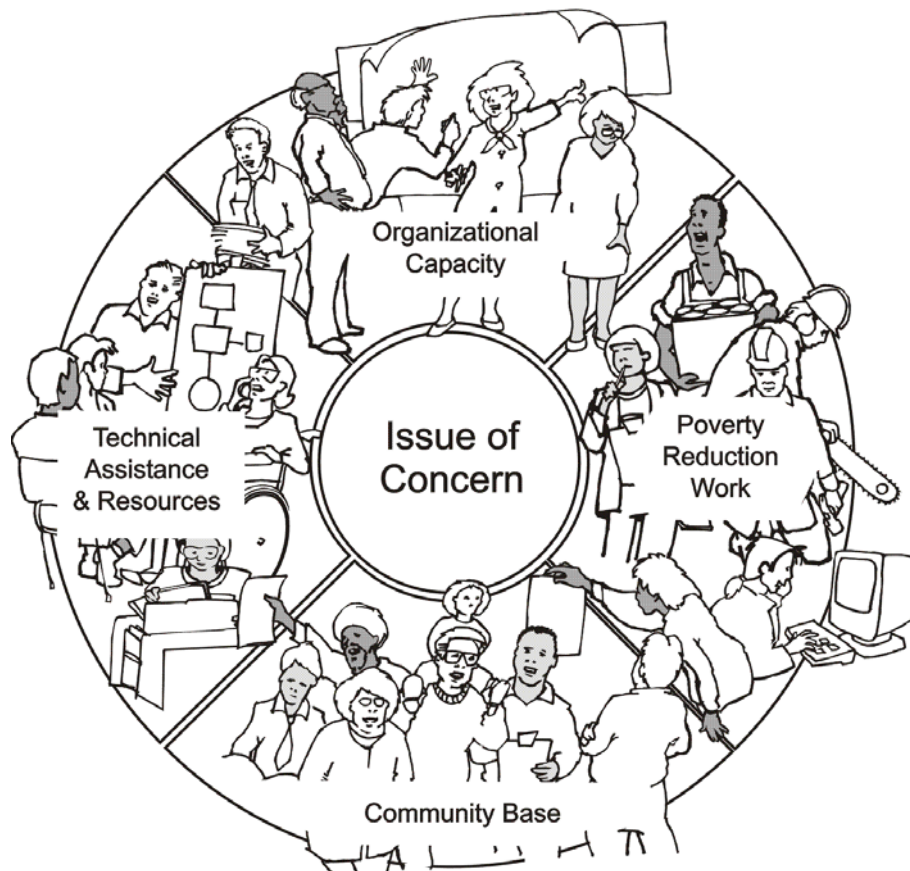
THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF COMMUNITY CHANGE

If you sat down and interviewed the staff and key leaders of any convening group on a Monday morning about their tasks for the upcoming month, you'd likely come up with a to-do list of pages upon pages.

While there are hundreds of details that a convening group must tend to, research into good and best practice makes us think that there are four major tasks – or building blocks - that convening groups must undertake in order to achieve dramatic results.

As the diagram below indicates, these building blocks are:

- Comprehensive issue-related work
- Building a community base
- Building organizational capacity
- Importing technical and financial resources



The work in these areas is inter-related – a convening group, for example, requires a strong base of support from the community in order to carry out a large scale initiative for change. Yet, each area is important enough that the group's volunteers and staff should devote extra attention to ensure they are performing well in each area.

Comprehensive Issue-Related Work

In any community, there are likely scores – if not hundreds – of initiatives that work on issues of concern.

The core mission of a convenor organization is to substantially improve the effectiveness – and if necessary the scale and number – of those efforts in a way that ensures that fewer local residents are victims of a specific problem. Convenor groups carry out this mission through a series of key areas of work:

- *Helping the community* to better understand the extent and depth of the issue for different local groups as well as the root causes and dynamics;
- *Identifying and selecting opportunities* that are most likely to have a positive impact locally and sharing these opportunities with the community;
- *Facilitating* the creation of high-impact, comprehensive community-wide plans, strategies and initiatives to take advantage of these opportunities;
- *Supporting local organizations* as they develop concrete and effective initiatives through a variety of supports, such as technical assistance, brokering and coordinating activities, social marketing, improving access to funding, advocacy and special convenor-administered projects;
- *Tracking and analyzing* the results of local efforts, identifying lessons learned, and determining how to generate greater results in the future;
- *Pushing for systems changes* at the local – and non-local – level that will scale up innovative, proven solutions and result in a long-term, sustained improvement in the life of the community.

A convenor group that is able to carry out all these tasks effectively is far more likely to expand upon and improve local efforts to initiate change.

Each one of these tasks alone adds value to a community's existing efforts to address specific social issues and should, by itself, result in at least a modest level of improvement in the situation. A convenor group that is able to carry out all these tasks effectively, however, is far more likely to expand upon and improve local efforts in ways that will lead to dramatic, far-reaching results.

Community Base

No matter how “smart” a convenor group’s work, how committed its leadership group or talented its staff team, they cannot successfully address a deep-seated social issue on their own. They need to mobilize a much broader local effort.

In Montreal, the organization Regroupement Economique Sud-Ouest (RESO), a successful convening group, captures this idea of leverage in the phrase “faire faire,” or, “getting others to do.” We think we can add a subtle, though important improvement to that phrase – “getting others to *be willing and able to do*” the work.

A convening group must engage at least three groups of people and organizations to launch and sustain a successful local effort to initiate change:

- Organizations and leaders from all sectors, particularly citizens immediately impacted by the problem, that are willing and able to take on concrete projects to improve matters;
- The general public, whose support is required to maintain a long-term community-based effort;
- Organizations external to the community – federal and provincial policy agencies, funders, businesses with head offices outside the community, etc. – that are in a position to support local efforts.

Building a community base for a long-term social change campaign truly does require convenor groups to weave together art and science. They need to be rigorous with the work described in the previous section. At the same time, they have to do it in a way that engages the passion and commitment of a broad and diverse group of organizations and leaders so they will invest their time, skills, networks and resources in a sustained effort.

Organizational Capacity

At the end of the day, the ability of a convening group to stimulate, launch and nurture a broad-based local effort to accomplish social change rests on a number of key organizational strengths. These include:

- A clear sense of the organization's mission in creating the cultural changes in the community required to address the issue;
- A group of high-profile, committed and skilled leaders, representative of the community's diversity, that can influence the community to change;
- A competent and committed staff team with knowledge, skills and experience to manage and support the effort;
- A structure and process of decision making that allows the organization to be effective at strategic decision-making, functional issues (e.g. fundraising) and the day-to-day work;
- Multi-year, diverse and sufficient funding to cover the core operations of the convening organization and, when appropriate, additional initiative-specific funding;
- Excellent planning, human resource, administration, communication and evaluation systems to assist leaders and staff to guide and manage their work;
- An organizational culture that reflects the key themes of multisectoral collaboration, comprehensive thinking and action, learning and change and an emphasis on community assets.

Despite its importance, staff and leaders in convening groups, as well as their funders, often do not devote sufficient time, energy and resources to building and maintaining the convening group's capacity. Concrete projects, after all, are the things that will ultimately lead to positive community change. The temptation to focus on these things alone is often overwhelming – particularly when the problem facing the community is severe.

Groups that neglect issues of organizational capacity, however, run the real risk of ending up like the fabled goose that laid golden eggs: forced to keep producing at all costs, with little care for its health, the goose eventually became ill and unable to produce any longer. Convening groups that are serious about dramatically dealing with a particular issue of concern over the long term will make organizational capacity building and nurturing a high priority.

Technical and Financial Resources

Organizations that take on the important job of sponsoring and managing the work of a convening group will often have a wealth of financial and technical resources at their disposal.

Even the most skilled, high-performing and well-resourced groups, however, will find it necessary to import at least some extra support in these areas in order to carry out their community building, poverty reduction and organizational capacity building work.

This includes, first and foremost, financial resources to support the core operations of the convening group – in particular the expenses related to staff, facilities, and evaluation, as well as the range of miscellaneous expenses that accompany any community development work (e.g. travel expenses, research materials, etc.).

In some cases, convening groups will occasionally need to import people to assist with one or more specific pieces of work for which the group does not have the skills, knowledge and abilities, such as fundraising, multisectoral collaboration, or policy analysis.

While a convening group will certainly need financial resources to cover these costs, many can complement financial resources with an innovative array of in-kind contributions, including, among others:

- Free, or lower-than-cost, facilities and meeting spaces;
- Secondments of talented staff persons;
- Pro-bono, at-cost, or lower-than-cost media and marketing services;
- Pro-bono, at-cost, or lower-than-cost administration support.

Not surprisingly, these resources rarely just fall into the laps of the convening group. It must invest a good deal of time to identify and engage the organizations with the capacity to make them available, create win-win collaborative arrangements and nurture these relationships for the entirety of the effort and beyond.

Convening groups might be able to get away from managing this area of the work well, but the organization's overall effectiveness can be substantially improved by making this an ongoing priority and investing an appropriate amount of time and energy.

THE PHASES OF A COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

It is often difficult to pinpoint exactly where and when a broad-based local effort to address a specific social problem begins. Such efforts tend to emerge out of the community's many ongoing initiatives – both big and small – aimed at dealing with the issue.

Yet deliberate efforts to “scale up” and make dramatic changes tend to have distinct stages or life cycles. In nearly every local initiative we've reviewed, the following four major phases have emerged:

- Exploring Local Interest
- Building the Conditions for Success
- Action, Leadership, Learning and Change
- Renewal or Wind-down.

The dividing lines between each phase are often blurred and unclear. At the same time, in each broad phase, convening groups generally focus their attention on achieving a number of minimum milestones in each area of the four areas of their work. Our research tells us that the entire life cycle of a local effort can take four to ten years to unfold.

How far a group can lead the local effort depends, in part, on its ability to complete the key milestones and manage a series of challenges in each phase.

There is no guarantee, of course, that a convenor group will successfully manage to work through all of these phases. Some find that there is no local interest in mounting a broad-based local effort and choose to revisit the question later. Other groups are unable to develop the capacity required to implement a community plan. Still others complete the full cycle and choose to renew and to “take their work to the next level.”

How far and successfully a group can lead the local effort depends, in part, on its ability to manage the successful completion of the key milestones and manage a series of challenges in each phase.

Exploring Local Interest

The seed of any broad-based effort to address a specific community issue usually lies in a group of local leaders' restless dissatisfaction with current attempts to solve an ongoing and disturbing problem.

Sooner or later, the adventurous group will organize itself to accomplish a number of key tasks to determine whether the community has the willingness and capacity to complement existing efforts with a new approach – one that results in a dramatic change. The major tasks for the group at this stage are likely to include:

Issue-Related Work

- Generate a general understanding of the extent and depth of the problem in the community;
- Understand the major themes and phases of a comprehensive, multisectoral effort to initiate change.

Community Base

- Explore the broader local interest in participating in a long term, multisectoral and comprehensive initiative to overcome the problem;
- Develop an initial vision of what a broad-based local effort might accomplish and some of the key principles and values to guide the effort.

Organizational Capacity

- Establish a core group of diverse and committed leaders from each sector to “steward” the work of the convening group;
- Understand the work of a convening organization, how it differs from traditional approaches, and how it might unfold in the community.

Technical & Financial Resources

- Identify and reach out to organizations that might be able to invest the extra technical and financial resources the convening group will require to carry out the work.

There is a wide range of techniques a core group of leaders can use to complete these basic tasks – e.g., focus groups, town hall meetings, one-on-one conversations. Whatever methods are used, the leadership group will want to know that there is a genuine willingness and capacity to mount a more ambitious local response to the problem before the next, more intensive phase of building the conditions for a successful social change campaign.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGES IN PHASE ONE

- ***Creating a Team of Champion Change-Makers***

Like anything ambitious, a convening group will never get off the ground nor have people working towards the next stage unless there are a few influential, well networked, leaders – staff, volunteers and partners– who are passionate and committed to changing the community culture around the issue. Finding these leaders early enough in the process is challenging for some communities.

- ***Understanding the Work of a Convening Organization***

Developing practical projects to initiate change makes sense to most people. The mechanics of launching a comprehensive multisectoral collaboration, however, are less obvious and the initial leaders involved in a convening group frequently struggle to clearly understand much of the work they are about to undertake. This makes it more difficult to plan the work and explain it to potential partners and supporters.

- ***Overcoming Skepticism***

Many people have participated in – or observed from the sidelines – community efforts that promised to change the community forever, yet failed to deliver on that promise. Others are eager to work on the problem, but are skeptical that large-scale efforts will meet with much success. Convening groups must often work hard to overcome the inevitable skepticism of potentially key allies in order to get the effort off the ground.

- ***Dealing with Competing Agendas***

Local residents and organizations in vibrant and struggling communities alike will generally be working on a range of community issues and will want to be very careful about where they spend their time, energy and financial resources. Convening groups in development must be sure to present the strongest case possible for a community-wide effort to address their specific concern and introduce it strategically.

Building Conditions for Success

If and when a group has determined that there is sufficient local willingness and capacity to undertake a comprehensive, multisectoral change program, it will begin to focus its efforts on building the local conditions for a successful initiative.

There are a number of key tasks that a convening group should complete in order to ensure that their campaign enjoys a high probability of generating deep and sustained results once it is off the ground. These tasks include:

Issue-Related Work

- Clarify the working definition of the problem;
- Achieve a better understanding of the extent and depth of the problem;
- Identify areas where a community might be able to generate good results;
- Explore, if appropriate, good practice in addressing the problem from other community efforts;
- Develop a community-wide plan to guide the community's work.

Community Base

- Identify and engage a broad base of local leaders to develop a vision of what a local effort might accomplish, and involve them in the research and planning work of the convening group.

Organizational Capacity

- Expand the leadership group to lead the effort;
- Clarify the convening group's mission and operating principles;
- Hire, orient and train staff;
- Finalize the sponsorship arrangement for the convening organization;
- Create appropriate decision-making structures;
- Establish planning, management, communication, human resource and evaluation systems.

Technical & Financial Resources

- Secure the financial resources required to carry out the strategic, collaborative and organizational capacity-building work described above.

While these key tasks may seem straightforward, they are not always easily accomplished – they require careful planning, strategic thinking and a great deal of energy and persistence from a group of leaders who are respected in the community and are committed to seeing the campaign operate for several years to come.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGES IN PHASE TWO

- ***Sponsorship***

As with any community initiative, deciding who administers and manages the day-to-day work of the convening group is almost as important as the work itself. Many organizations find sponsoring a convening group awkward – the work is complex, dynamic and at times political. Other local organizations often have strong preferences about which organizations should – and should not – be sponsors. There are at least a half-dozen sponsorship options for local efforts – none of them perfect – and groups often find choosing the option that best suits their community one of the most delicate decisions they will ever make.

- ***Appropriate Structure***

Who makes decisions (and how) to guide community-wide efforts to address a particular social problem is critically important. It can make the difference between an organization that can tackle complex issues and make good decisions quickly and one that is unable to get even the simplest tasks completed without a great deal of effort. Research into 15 years of broad-based community efforts suggests there is no one right make-up of working groups or division of decision-making authority. Groups need to create decision-making processes that are open and flexible enough to change as the initiative unfolds.

- ***Funding for Core Operations***

Raising funds for specific, short-term projects is easier than mobilizing multi-year funds to support the operations of a convening organization. While the case for investing in social change is strong, convening groups need to be very strategic in preparing and sharing the case for investment in a convening group with supporters who frequently do not reserve grant funds for such purposes.

Who makes decisions to guide community-wide social change efforts (and how) is critically important.

- ***A Working Definition of The Issue***

Many groups manage to avoid the difficult question of who is affected in the early phase when people are eager to do something about a problem. Yet, once the work turns to identifying who should benefit from the group's efforts, setting goals and measuring progress, this difficult discussion always comes up. There is no perfect definition of any social issue – all are complex – but groups can get stopped in their tracks if they do not come up with even a simple working definition of the issue and who it affects to guide their efforts.

- ***Balancing Process and Action***

Much of the work in this phase is important process work – building partnerships, doing research and planning and mobilizing a community effort. Convening groups often struggle to keep a community's more action-oriented leaders and organizations that are engaged and committed to the initiative on board until the preparations for the initiative are complete and the group can focus on more concrete projects.

Action, Leadership, Learning & Change

Once a convening group has completed its conditions for success, it is tempting to think that the next step is to simply implement the community plan. In practice, it rarely unfolds this cleanly.

The moment a convening group and its allies began to work diligently on the conditions for success described in the previous section, they set into motion a dynamic community process that results in a vibrant cycle of *local action, leadership, community learning and change*. New leaders and organizations emerge, presenting new opportunities and capacities. Local dynamics around the problem may shift unexpectedly due to some internal or external shock resulting in pressures to shift priorities or approaches. Most importantly, the convenor group and its partners will gain new insights, skills and knowledge in their work that shape the way they move forward.

The community plan produced in the previous phase represents the community's best sense of how to proceed at the beginning of its community-wide effort. The community must be prepared to upgrade its approach continually in its drive to find solutions to the problem. The key tasks in this phase include:

Issue-Related Work

- Assist groups to identify, develop and grow concrete initiatives, as well as supporting their efforts to track results, identify learnings and make improvements to their work;
- Seek new opportunities to address the problem through continual scanning of the local and external environment;
- Review and continually upgrade the convening group's strategy for supporting local organizations and leaders in their work.

This action phase is perhaps the most challenging and rewarding time in a community-wide effort to initiate change.

Community Base

- Expand the number of local organizations, leaders and residents aware of – and actively involved in – local efforts to solve the problem;
- Strengthen the willingness and capacity of existing partners to keep working on the problem in the long term;
- Ensure frequent and effective communication with partners and the community;
- Celebrate successes, key milestones and learnings.

Organizational Capacity

- Upgrade the convening group's governance structure as required;
- Adapt management, planning, human resource and administrative systems as appropriate;

- Expand the group's financial resources, staff skills and leadership participation to suit new priorities.

Technical & Financial Resources

- Sustain and nurture relationships with existing funders and technical assistance providers;
- Identify and develop new relationships with funders and technical assistance providers as required.

This action phase is perhaps the most challenging and rewarding time in a community-wide change initiative. It is full of successes, failures, hard work and unexpected twists that test the limits of a convening group's capacity to effectively steward a process of enduring positive change.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGES IN PHASE THREE

- ***Building Momentum***

As one community activist argued, “It’s hard to drive a parked bus!” Some groups find themselves with an excellent plan, strong and numerous partnerships and sufficient resources but with little action to generate the energy required to launch a local effort to effect change. Identifying, carrying out and profiling short-term results that demonstrate the possibilities to the community is a tricky but essential exercise for groups struggling to build momentum.

- ***Managing Growth***

Once sparked, many initiatives “catch fire” and groups find themselves with more partners, funds, projects and opportunities than they ever dreamed of. Convening groups often find it difficult to manage the workload and the complexity of decision-making, planning and communication that accompanies such growth. Managed poorly, these groups can find themselves spreading their efforts too thinly and generating weak outcomes as a result.

- ***Sharing Learning***

As the number and diversity of projects and partners increases, so does the learning about what does and does not work. It is very important, yet remarkably difficult, for this learning to be shared with a wide group of leaders and organizations – not just a small group of staff people and leaders at the centre of the convening organization – so that the learning can be used to craft more effective initiatives and to improve management of the effort.

- ***Embracing Failure***

Any initiative that encourages local organizations and leaders to come up with new and better ways to address a problem is guaranteed to produce some initiatives that simply do not work out. This is the natural price of thinking out of the box and striving for dramatic results. Most communities deal poorly with failure and in some cases actively discourage it by avoiding risky – albeit highly innovative – initiatives or covering up things that don’t work out. Convening groups must work hard to counteract this understandable, yet ultimately counter-productive, instinct by modeling a culture that promotes continual learning and change.

- ***Burn Out***

The work of leading a local change effort is demanding and many leaders and staff members of convening groups unintentionally ‘burn’ themselves out in the process. While many people are able to rebound after a short rest, the loss of their leadership – even if only temporarily – weakens the capacity of the convenor group and can result in less-than-anticipated results. Maintaining a healthy, productive and stable staff and volunteer team is perhaps one of the greatest challenges a convenor group will experience in their work.

Renewal or Wind-down

At some point during the initiative, once the community's work is well underway, and usually after three to five years, the volunteer leaders, staff, partners and even funders of a multi-year effort begin to ask, "Should we continue with this effort or wind it down?"

Sometimes, the question is a practical response to the approaching end of the group's first community plan or the convening group's core operating grants. At other times, it is born out of the frustration of influential leaders or organizations that the work to date has not made as much progress in reducing the severity of the problem as they hoped. Happily, sometimes the motivation for asking the question is rooted in the community's strong desire to take some time to reflect on how the effort can be scaled up for even greater results.

Regardless of the motivation, there are a number of key tasks a convening group must attend to in this very natural – and sometimes dramatic – phase in the local campaign. These tasks include:

Issue-Related Work

- Package and analyze the major accomplishments of the effort in: a) reducing the severity of the problem, b) expanding the willingness and capacity of local organizations to address the problem and c) creating a supportive environment for implementing change in the community and among external supporters;
- Identify the major lessons learned and ways the effort might be improved in the future.

There is a rich array of options for how a convenor group can renew itself to ensure the community has the capacity to continue implementing change long into the future.

Community Base

- Celebrate the group's accomplishments and acknowledge the contributions of key leaders and organizations;
- Provide plentiful and different ways for the community to learn about the results and lessons learned;
- Determine whether and how the community – particularly key leaders and organizations – would like to renew or wind down the community-wide campaign.

Organizational Capacity

- Bring on new staff and volunteers if and when required;
- Review and, if necessary, upgrade the mission and operating principles of the convening group;
- Review and, if necessary, restructure the sponsorship for the convening group;

- Review and, if necessary, upgrade the planning, management and evaluation systems for the group.

Technical & Financial Resources

- Publicly acknowledge financial and technical supporters for their investment and participation;
- Engage current financial and technical assistance supporters in reflections on the work to date and deliberations about the future;
- Review and, if necessary, identify and expand partnerships with other technical and financial supporters.

While the response to the question of whether or not to continue is a simple one – Yes or No – there is a rich array of options for how a community and convenor group can renew itself to ensure the community has the capacity to continue implementing change long into the future.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGES IN PHASE FOUR

- ***Understanding What Just Happened***

Many people have a hard time making sense of all the activities associated with a community-wide change effort, what they actually accomplished and what was learned. Some people find it particularly difficult to understand the contribution of the convening group to the work and eventual results. While a group can minimize this fuzziness early on by developing a rigorous evaluation and communication strategy, many convenor groups find they need to pay extra attention to packaging and sharing the story of the community and the convening group in a way that is easily understood by diverse stakeholders.

- ***Resources for Core Operations***

A community that chooses to continue their collaborative work on an issue will likely require additional financial resources to support the core operations of the convening group into the next phase. Even wildly successful convening groups often find that their work is no longer as exciting to potential investors who have since become all too familiar with their work and/or have moved on to focus on other issues. Re-engaging potential supports – and identifying others – can prove to be an uphill battle.

- ***Succession Planning***

All key volunteers and staff eventually move on from community-wide initiatives. If the community determines that the initiative should continue, convening groups often struggle to ensure a smooth transition between the outgoing and incoming leaders. Succession planning is one of the most important – yet often neglected – pieces of work for a convening group in the renewal phase of their work.

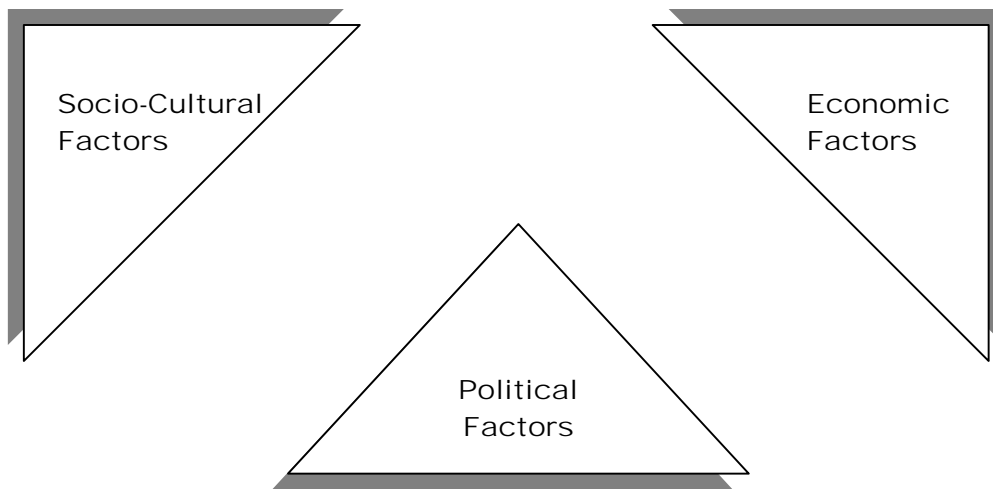
- ***Maintaining Momentum***

When a community decides to renew its work, it often risks spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy back at the drawing board, working to find ways to generate even greater results in the future. Some groups have found out the hard way that the entire social change effort can quickly lose momentum if they neglect to keep their partners – and broader community and external supporters – actively engaged in the work that has proven successful so far.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Convening organizations do not operate in a vacuum. On the contrary, what they do, how they do it, when they do it, and whether or not it gets done at all, is profoundly influenced by their environments.

At any given point in time, there are literally dozens of external factors – some more important than others – that directly and indirectly influence a convening group’s work. These can be grouped into three inter-related areas:



Convening groups serious about changing a community’s approach to a problem and mounting a deliberate campaign to implement positive change will manage every aspect of their work with the environment in mind. The more successful ones scan the environmental constantly and respond strategically to new opportunities and hurdles as they arise, even if this means changing plans that have taken a lot of time and effort to prepare. Responsiveness in an ever-changing environment is critical to a convening group’s success – and sometimes even its survival.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

The environment can make the convening group's work easier or more difficult. Communities based in struggling regional economies will have to work much harder to address issues related to poverty, for example, than communities in wealthier economic regions.

Environmental factors can even help and hinder the work at the same time. Convening groups operating in booming urban economies, for example, may find that local businesses are more willing and able to become involved and invest in community initiatives, but find that the same business leaders wonder why the social problem exists at all in such a prosperous community.

The following eight, often interrelated, environmental factors tend to have the most profound influence on a convening group's work.

Economic Factors

- The current structure of the local economy (e.g. number and size of employers, types of industry, whether or not corporate offices are located in or outside the community, etc.);
- The long term and cyclical trends that continually shape the local economy (e.g. technological change, fluctuating commodity prices, recessions, etc.);
- Periodic or one time economic events (e.g. the shut down or arrival of a major employer).

Political Factors

- Government policies, practices and behaviours that impact local economies and communities;
- The manner in which convening groups are funded by governments and philanthropic organizations and the regulations and legislation that directly impact the type of work a convening organization – and local players – can do to address social problems.

While convening groups must adapt their work to fit the environment, they must remember that they are trying to change it as well.

Socio-Cultural Factors

- The degree to which local residents and organizations identify with and feel part of their local community;
- The culture of participation and activism of local residents and organizations (e.g. collaborative versus conflictual approaches);
- Local attitudes regarding the issue. (e.g. alleviation versus reduction of a problem, emphasis on personal versus systemic reasons underlying it).

While convening groups must adapt their work to *fit* the environment, they must remember that at the end of the day they are trying to *change* it as well – to create a new culture that leads to community-wide changes resulting in dramatic improvements (significant reduction in youth crime, restoration of part of the environment, etc.). In fact, convening groups will not generate any significant and sustainable improvements without changing some of the very systems that cause the problem in the first place.

Again, this will sound completely absurd to some. How can a comparatively small group of people and organizations – albeit expanding all the time – hope to change the much larger, complex environment in which they work? Well, it may not happen often, nor to the extent people would like, but it does happen:

- In Saint John, N.B., the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) was instrumental in encouraging the Provincial government to provide parents in high school a full subsidy and improve their prospects of finishing school and securing good employment.
- In local communities across the United States, there are hundreds of businesses signing living wage covenants, voluntarily agreements that commit the company to paying wages well above the poverty line.
- In Waterloo, Ontario, a group of local funders and community leaders reviewed projects on behalf of the regional branch of Human Resources Development Canada to fund non-profit projects that sought to assist low-income residents to exit poverty, not just to get “any old” low paying job.

Convening groups that have done the best job of engaging influential leaders from a wide range of sectors tend to have the most success in influencing the environment.

As a rule of thumb, the convening groups that have done the best job of engaging influential leaders from a wide range of sectors, tend to have the most success in influencing the environment – they have the very people who have the clout and credibility to change things.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

When all the themes of community convening are combined, they provide a powerful framework to guide convening groups in their efforts to initiate change – and to inspire others to do the same.

The chart on the next page illustrates the degree to which these themes are inter-related. No one element can be adequately understood without considering the others.

In order to establish appropriately ambitious stretch targets for its work, a convening organization must acknowledge its current organizational capacity, the existing and likely future community base it might engage, as well as the environmental forces at play in its community. Similarly, an external funder and technical assistance team is advised to provide only as much support and resources as the convening group has the ability to absorb and effectively manage.

The framework outlines the major tasks or milestones in each phase of its work. And while the framework does not provide a detailed step-by-step blueprint for a convening group to follow – each organization’s circumstances and community are too unique for that – it does provide a critical big picture of how to generate progressively better results as the organization evolves.

Viewing the work of a convening group in this way highlights the fact that successful convening groups are likely to spend a considerable amount of time balancing the immediate task of supporting local initiatives with strategically managing the comprehensive elements of its stewardship work.

Local organizations – and external funders, technical assistance providers and policy makers – interested in supporting a convening group in a way that allows them to generate long-term, sustainable results will appreciate this and upgrade their approach accordingly.

	Phase One Exploring Local Interest	Phase Two Building Conditions for Success	Phase Three Action-Learning-Change	Phase Four Renewal or Wind-down
Comprehensive Issue-Related Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get a general understanding of the extent and depth of the problem in the community. • Understand the major themes and phases of a community-wide effort to implement change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify a working definition of the issue. • Get a firm grip on the extent, depth and dynamics of the local problem • Identify areas and strategies of possible high impact. • Create a comprehensive, multi-year community plan to solve the problem. • Develop a learning and evaluation strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support local efforts to deal with the issue. • Evaluate efforts and identify key efforts to address the problem. • Scale up efforts that work. • Continually reassess and, if necessary, upgrade community plan and approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the outcomes of the initiative to date and the potential for greater impact in the future. • Review – and if necessary – upgrade working definition of the problem and general approach to solving it.
Building a Community Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore broader local interest in a comprehensive, long-term multisectoral effort to deal with the problem. • Develop an initial vision and principles to drive and guide future work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and secure broad-based sectoral partnerships to assist in developing and carrying out a community plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepen the commitment and capacity of existing partners to solve the problem. • Expand the number and range of organizations involved as appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrate the outcomes and lessons generated to date • Explore local interest and in continuing a broad-base local effort to address the issue.
Strengthening Organizational Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and establish a core group of committed leaders from across sectors to ‘steward’ the process. • Understand the ‘work’ of a convening organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the leadership for the convening group. • Finalize the administrative sponsorship of the convening group. • Recruit skilled staff • Develop governance structure & process. • Create management, communication, financial & administrative systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continually review and upgrade governance structure and process. • Adjust internal systems as appropriate. • Strengthen staff team through training and other retention measures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review – if and when necessary – adjust sponsorship arrangements. • Review – if and when necessary - re-tool administrative systems if and when necessary. • Review – and if and when necessary – strengthen staff team.
Importing Technical & Financial Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify technical resources (e.g. best practices, intermediary organizations) and funding organizations that might be accessed to support this work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilize multi-year funding to support the work. • Identify and secure needed technical assistance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain and nurture relationships with current technical assistance providers and funders. • Identify and expand technical and financial supporters as required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage current – and potential – technical assistance providers and funders fully in participating in learning and decisions on next steps.

THE FRAMEWORK IN PRACTICE

There is a rule of thumb in starting a business that success involves equal parts of planning, perspiration and adaptability. The same formula holds for convening organizations.

It is not at all surprising that a convening group's work rarely unfolds as logically, systematically and seamlessly as the framework suggests. Any number of circumstances – both internal and external – may combine to make the process far more disjointed. Groups may already have an active convening group supporting different initiatives aimed at dealing with the issue, but simply need to step back and upgrade their approach to think more comprehensively about their work. Key staff or volunteers may leave during the key implementation stage. As a result, convenor groups tend to master different aspects of the framework at different speeds, and in some cases, ignore certain components and steps altogether.

This does not necessarily result in a less effective organization – or, more importantly, better solutions to the problem. There are examples, for instance, of convening groups that manage to implement positive change without having created a broad, multisectoral community base. While these groups do not benefit from the richer perspective on community needs and priorities, or the deepened community commitment that the term “broad-based” implies, their ability to make real changes in peoples' lives is not necessarily impaired.

Yet, groups that neglect to actively steward all the key components of the framework certainly run a higher risk of not assisting the community to deal with the issue on the scale to which it might aspire. There is, for instance, a tendency among convening groups to skip steps and spend all their efforts dealing with the obvious opportunities. They reason – quite rightly – that there are plenty of good opportunities that don't require extensive research to uncover and understand – why spend the time and effort getting a thorough scan if there is plenty to do in front of them? While this is a very compelling case, these groups will often miss not-so-obvious opportunities to make dramatic impacts on the problem in their community.

There is no way to predict with any degree of certainty the opportunities and challenges a convening group will face as it goes about its day-to-day work. At a minimum, however, the Community Convening Framework can help a group become better stewards of community change by identifying the key issues, phases, milestones and challenges they are likely to face in their journey.

MAKING IT WORK: THE SPIRIT OF THE ENTERPRISE

This convening framework goes some way to demystifying the key roles of a convening organization, as well as the major phases, milestones and challenges of multi-year, comprehensive, collaborative approach to addressing local issues.

It may be slightly oversimplified and, as the previous section confirms, it may appear a little linear, but it is nonetheless helpful to have such a framework to help convening groups drive and manage what is normally a messy community process.

It is important to note, however, that while we think the framework is helpful, we don't think convening itself is very easy. In our review of many convening efforts, and in our own personal experience, we have come to the conclusion that there is nothing natural about community-wide processes and in fact they are cumbersome, and quite fragile, prone to fly off the tracks, sometimes permanently, for all the reasons described in the framework.

In order to be successful, it is not enough for convening groups to be guided by a technically strong framework. They need some extra “glue” to keep all the players engaged in a complex, dynamic enterprise of community building.

Leadership – of staff, key volunteers and members of the community – can be that glue. But leaders must remember the importance of three key characteristics, as outlined by Karen Ray in her book *The Nimble Collaboration*, if they are to be successful:

- Results – the only thing that can keep a collaboration going for any period of time beyond its initial stages is real results. Results – not process and vision - provide the fuel organization to stay engaged over the long haul and community-wide processes need them to fuel their work.
- Relationships – community-wide processes are messy, unpredictable and lead to changes that some people and organizations fear. Trust, honesty and understanding between people and organizations are essential to helping people move through stormy waters together.
- Resiliency – there is nothing easy about convening work and, as with any venture, it is the drive and “stick-to-itness” of a few key personalities that keeps a community-wide initiative surviving and moving forward at those times when it seems easier to just let the whole thing fold.

A focus on results, relationships and resiliency – these are the intangible elements of a successful community effort that the core staff and leaders of the convening organization cannot expect to emerge spontaneously (though this sometimes happens) – they have to model them in a way that sets the tone for the entire enterprise from the very beginning.

The health of our communities depends on leaders and organizations with these attributes to step forward to do the work of a convening organization.

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